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A Policy Comes Under Fire

The president scrambles to counter congressional opposition on Central America.

The momentum against Ronald Reagan's Central America policy mounted day by day. The House Foreign Affairs Committee rejected the president's plea to send more money to El Salvador. The intelligence committees of both houses of Congress were poised to cut off funds for the secret war against Nicaragua. And the chairman of a powerful congressional subcommittee vowed to block additional military aid to Guatemala. In an 11th-hour effort to save his crumbling policies, the president tried to regain the offensive. This week Reagan will argue his case for Central America before a joint session of Congress—the first time a president has made such an appeal solely on a foreign-policy issue since Jimmy Carter came to Capitol Hill to talk about SALT II in 1979.

The White House announcement froze congressional action and gave Reagan a few days of wriggle room. But the president's basic dilemma was unchanged. He has committed himself to the kind of military solution in Central America that gets minimal support among Congress and the American people. Reagan will argue that Central America is too important to abandon, that America's prestige is at stake and that the United States cannot afford to let the Soviet Union get another foothold in the region. But that was going to be a hard sell not only in the United States but with America's moderate allies in the region. Secretary of State George Shultz, who spent two days talking with Mexican officials last week, returned with only a vague communiqué agreeing that violence is bad.

From Reagan's point of view, there was some good news from the south. U.S. officials finally succeeded in nudging out El Salvador's defense minister, Gen. José Guillermo García—although his successor's spotty human-rights record might only make Congress more skittish. In Brazil, authorities seized four Libyan planes bound for Nicaragua with tons of arms and explosives. Reagan planned to use that incident as evidence of the Sandinistas' military buildup—and of outside interference in the region. And when Salvadoran guerrilla leader Salvador Cayetano Carpio reportedly committed suicide after Nicaraguan officials claimed that a trusted aide masterminded the assassination of his second-in-command, U.S. officials felt encouraged. "It's pretty clear that gang warfare has broken out among the insurgents," said State Department spokesman Alan Romberg.

Rebel Advances: The Reagan administration saw García's resignation as an especially promising sign. As defense minister for almost four years, García was a pragmatist who allied himself with moderates such as interim President Alvaro Magaña and former President José Napoleón Duarte. He was also the most powerful man in the country. But rebel gains this year troubled his fellow generals—and American officials. García was hurt by an Army officers' revolt three months ago and then threatened by a new mutiny from the Air Force. U.S. officials decided that García was not a good enough military commander for the job. "I give him an A-plus for pushing reforms and keeping this place together," said one senior Western official in San Salvador. "But it was time for someone else to come in and win the war."

The American Embassy supported President Magaña's nomination of Gen. Carlos Eugenio Vides Casanova to be the new defense minister—despite some obvious drawbacks. Some soldiers derisively call him "Señorita Casanova" because he lacks combat experience. As commander of the National Guard since 1979, Casanova developed a reputation for honesty, but his troops have been accused of routinely murdering civilians. Five guardsmen were charged with killing four American churchwomen; two others were arrested for murdering two American agrarian-reform experts. Casanova will have to unify the mutinous armed services if he is to turn the war around. But with presidential elections scheduled for December, some soldiers may already consider him a lame duck. He cannot improve the Army without removing some unsuitable officers, but they are unlikely to go quietly. "He's not the enemy of anybody now," said one Salvadoran businessman who has known Casanova since childhood. "But when he starts making hard decisions he will be."

For Ronald Reagan last week, Congress was the principal enemy. In their push to cut off funds, powerful congressmen who control the flow of money that supports Reagan's programs cited massive public suspicion of a growing U.S. involvement in Central America. "I got a thousand letters in a one-month period," said Democrat Clarence Long of Maryland. "Only seven were supportive of the president's policies." For the White House, that was just the beginning. The rest of the news from Capitol Hill last week was equally bad:

- The House Foreign Affairs Committee voted 19 to 16 to reject $50 million in additional military aid for El Salvador this year.
- Long's Appropriations Subcommittee stonewalled an administration request to divert an additional $60 million to El Salvador. Long said he would hang tough until the administration gave him promises—in writing—that it would seek a peaceful solution in El Salvador and appoint a special envoy to try to bring dissident factions into December's elections.
- Sen. Christopher Dodd, a member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, demanded a rare secret session of the entire Senate to hear intelligence information before he would agree to consider any further aid to Central America.
- Except for a last-minute lobbying blitz by the administration, the House and Senate intelligence committees would have voted to restrict covert activities in Central America. Senate Intelligence Committee chairman Barry Goldwater insisted that "the facts about Central America all show clearly that there is no [American] intent to overthrow the government of Nicaragua." But most of his colleagues disagreed, and so did the House Intelligence Committee chairman, Edward Boland. The Senate delayed a vote until after Reagan's speech in deference to Goldwater and the president. The House panel put off a decision after hearing from Shultz and CIA Director William Casey, who offered a guided tour of the front. Several members accepted the invitation, which many colleagues believed was part of a softening-up process before Reagan's speech.

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